

Powder keg

December saw the death of one of Ireland's most popular celebrities, Katy French, amid rumours of heavy cocaine use. The model's death has stoked fears of a growing 'cocaine culture' in the country. **Malachi O'Doherty** reports.

Ireland has only recently learnt to accept that it has a heroin problem. In working class areas of north Dublin, dealers were using guns with increasing regularity; murderous fall-outs between them were becoming a monthly news story. This last year, though, it's been the number of cocaine horror stories on the front pages that has left the country perplexed.

In December one of the most celebrated young models in the country, 24-year-old Katy French, collapsed at a party and died several days later in hospital. A Garda investigation into her death, involving officers from the National Drugs Unit, continues. Media speculation is rife about the model's involvement with cocaine; French admitted that she had used (but quit) the drug in interviews given just weeks before she died. Irish columnists are working overtime on the meaning of the tragedy; the death of Katy French has given Ireland its 'Diana' moment.

Ms French's death came weeks after two young men, John Grey, 23, and Kevin Doyle, 21, died after eating cocaine at a party in Waterford. As the country reels at the three deaths, it is preparing to take stock of the scale of the actual problem.

A high-profile book published this year, *High Society – drugs and the Irish middle classes*, provoked a snowstorm of publicity with its claims that middle class Ireland is in love with cocaine. Author Justine Delaney-Wilson detailed in the book – and on



Katy French: funeral left in mourning

a subsequent RTE documentary – that a government minister had admitted snorting coke. When asked for proof of the interview with the minister, she claimed the tapes had been destroyed.

Stephen Rowen, clinical director of Ireland's largest rehab clinic, the Dublin-based Rutland Centre, says cocaine is available in most pubs and virtually every city, town and village in Ireland. His claims are backed up by the latest police figures. In 2006, the Garda dealt with 1300 cases involving cocaine, making it second only to cannabis in terms of numbers of arrests.

Chairman of Ireland's National Advisory Committee on Drugs, Dr Des Corrigan, says the rise in popularity of powder cocaine has been accompanied by a rise in the use of crack cocaine. Workers at Addiction Response, a community drug project in Dublin, back this up. A spokesperson reports that clients with a crack problem made up only a fifth of those entering their cocaine project until early this year, but this has now risen to almost half. Things are changing fast.

Despite the significant increases in cocaine on the streets, police seizures at the border have tended to remain small. One exception was a shipment of a ton and a half that was lost into the sea off County Cork in July, from dinghies ferrying it in from a ship.

Government response to the problem was slow at first but appears to be gaining momentum. It is spending around half a million Euros on seven community-based services in Dublin and Cork, aimed at reaching cocaine users who are not attending existing treatment services, most of which are geared towards treating heroin users. Unfortunately, an industrial dispute with the Irish Pharmaceutical Union last month has delayed the opening of three of the clinics.

Like many other European countries, Ireland is left to wonder whether they've crossed the white line with cocaine. The political and social fallout from the recent deaths looks set to be more resounding than a set of fleeting headlines.